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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV

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SUBJECT: KING SIHANOUK ANNOUNCES "RETIREMENT"

Classified By: Ambassador Charles A. Ray. Reason: 1.4 (b) (d).

11. (C) Summary. In a message from Beijing, King Sihanouk announced October 6 his desire to retire due to his ill health. His message referred to a letter from PM Hun Sen and Prince Ranariddh endorsing as his successor Prince Sihamoni, son of Sihanouk and Queen Monineath. On October 7, he instructed acting Head of State Chea Sim not to refer any decisions to him as he was retired as of that date. Opposition leader Sam Rainsy told the Ambassador that Prince Ranariddh had made veiled threats to him in the National Assembly October 7, blaming him for King Sihanouk's actions. Rainsy had sent a letter to the King a day earlier requesting that the King not return to Cambodia as scheduled on October 7 because the government would organize demonstrations against the King. Rainsy said he was concerned about a "coup", but that he did not feel personally threatened. The royalist FUNCINPEC party is taking the King's actions seriously, although a senior FUNCINPEC leader suggested that Ranariddh was fed up with Rainsy and was "out to get him." Ranariddh suggested that it might be possible to get the King to change his mind; A CPP official agreed. Given Sihanouk's track record over the years of threatening to leave the stage, but always coming back for an encore, we are somewhat skeptical of his determination this time. End Summary.

12. (U) In a message from Beijing dated October 6, King Sihanouk requested that be allowed to retire. He said that he was ill with a new stomach ailment and that he was "physically and intellectually weak." His message referred to a September 4 letter to him from PM Hun Sen and National Assembly President Prince Ranariddh endorsing Prince Norodom Sihamoni as his successor, but noted that ultimately it is up to the Royal Throne Council to select a successor. In an October 7 message the King requested that acting Head of State Chea Sim not refer any decisions to him, as he was retired as of this date.

13. (C) On October 7, Opposition leader Sam Rainsy asked to see the Ambassador urgently. Rainsy told the Ambassador that in the morning session of the National Assembly Ranariddh had made veiled threats against him, suggesting that he was responsible for the King's "abdication" because of his letter to the King. Rainsy's letter the previous day asked the King to delay his scheduled October 7 return to Cambodia because, Rainsy claimed, a reliable source had informed Rainsy that there would be government-organized demonstrations against the King upon his arrival. The King subsequently delayed his return to Cambodia. Rainsy claimed that Ranariddh said the situation could get out of control and that Ranariddh commented that politicians should have been careful as their actions could have serious consequences. However, a senior FUNCINPEC official told us that he believed Rainsy had made up the story about demonstrations against the King on his arrival.

14. (C) Rainsy said he "could not exclude the possibility of a coup," although he did not say who would carry out this coup, except to suggest that it could consolidate power in one man's hands. Rainsy said that he did not feel in personal danger at the moment, but that the situation could deteriorate. The Ambassador urged Rainsy to take steps to

remove himself from danger if he felt threatened. He also urged that all parties remain calm and peaceful. The SRP issued a statement later in the day calling for calm. PM Hun Sen left Phnom Penh today for Hanoi to attend the ASEM.

15. (C) Officials in the royalist FUNCINPEC party are taking the King's resignation/abdication seriously, although so far most of the evidence confirming that it is real ultimately leads back to Prince Ranariddh. Deputy Prime Minister Lu Lay Sreng, an influential FUNCINPEC leader, told the Ambassador October 7 that he did not expect any violence, but that he believed both Ranariddh and Hun Sen are "fed up" with Sam Rainsy and are "out to get him." (Note: Ranariddh and Sam Rainsy are involved in messy counter-suits, Ranariddh's alleging libel and Rainsy's alleging that Ranariddh tried to have him killed. Ranariddh has threatened to have Rainsy's parliamentary immunity lifted so he can be prosecuted.)

16. (C) Ranariddh suggested that it might be possible to get the King to reverse his decision. He commented at the National Assembly that the King might change his mind in a day or two. He later said parliamentarians would sign a petition asking the King to stay on. The Director of the CPP cabinet, Thep Ngorn, commented to us that the best course of action would be for the two coalition parties to convince the King to change his mind, as he has done in the past.

17. (C) In terms of succession, if the King's decision holds, the nine-member Royal Throne Council has the Constitutional authority to decide the successor. However, the procedures for doing so have not been adopted by the National Assembly. If the issue were decided by a vote, PM Hun Sen would hold the tie-breaking vote if he and Ranariddh disagree on who it should be. By our count four of the members are loyal to Hun Sen and four are loyal to Ranariddh, including Ranariddh himself, who is a member based on his Presidency of the National Assembly. Prince Sihamoni has been the King's choice for some time and Ranariddh has endorsed him, as did Hun Sen in the September 4 letter released by Sihanouk.

18. (C) Comment: Given Sihanouk's track record of threats to resign, which extend back decades, we regard these most recent actions with some skepticism. However, many Cambodians appear to be taking Sihanouk's statements seriously. It is quite possible that a series of entreaties from political actors will lead Sihanouk to reconsider, or that he intended his messages to create an outpouring of support from the Cambodian people that would "force" him to stay on the throne. It is also possible that Ranariddh has been using the King's statements as a weapon to attack Sam Rainsy with whom he has long-standing animosity. We will see how this plays out in coming days.

Ray